

JFK: Inside the Target Car **(Discovery Channel):** **Another Attempted Re-enactment**

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Subject

- Another attempted reenactment of the JFK murder

Protagonists

- Gary Mack
- Adelaide T&E Systems
- Two JFK witnesses
- Two forensic experts
- A marksman (Michael Yardley)

Evidence analyzed

- Blood spatter patterns

Intrinsic assumptions

- A single shot hit JFK in the head.
- This shot struck at Zapruder frame 313.
- The limousine traveled at 7–8.5 mph at this instant.
- This shot entered at the posterior head site selected by the House Select Committee on Assassinations (not the Warren Commission site).
- The Zapruder film has not been altered.
- The only examined shooting sites were
 - the sixth floor window; and
 - the grassy knoll.

Outside the domain of this experiment

- A head shot from anywhere else
- Any shots to JFK's body or to John Connally
- Any shots that missed
- A second head shot
- Other evidence in the case

Implicit and explicit conclusions (of the Discovery Channel)

- JFK was hit only once in the head (from the rear).
- This shot came from the sixth floor window.
- Oswald fired this shot.
- The Warren Commission got it right.

A brief summary of what they did

The narrator begins by implying that the program will prove that the Warren Commission (WC) was correct, i.e., that a lone gunman did it, with the clear insinuation that Oswald was the man. (Of course, that's logically impossible: Oswald was not firing at the test site. No shooting at a range could ever determine who fired at JFK.)

In my view, the most that this experiment can claim is a truly simple conclusion: the blood spatter pattern matched a posterior head shot. Also in my view, hardly any serious critic of the WC would disagree with this conclusion, especially not anyone who has examined JFK's skull X-rays. (I have long agreed that no grassy knoll shot hit JFK.) Once this simple statement is accepted, the program can only follow a downhill trajectory, which it promptly proceeds to do.

Gary Mack and Michael Yardley, the designated marksman, first inspected three candidate sites in Dealey Plaza for frontal gunmen. The grassy knoll on the south side was ruled out because only two to three inches of JFK's head were visible above the windshield. (They had positioned a similar vehicle with riders at the supposed kill site on Elm Street.) The south side of the overpass was next eliminated because the shot would have pierced the windshield. (But no one mentioned the multiple eyewitnesses who reported that the windshield had been completely pierced, or the Ford Motor Company employee who said he received the windshield at the Ford plant with just such a hole.)

The north side of the overpass (the same side as the traditional grassy knoll) was greeted with genuine interest by the marksman: "Not a difficult shot. I

would keep an open mind on this position.” Mack’s sole objection to this site was that eyewitnesses would have seen such a shooter. (See my comments below on that.) Not surprisingly, that is the last we hear of this site.

With guidance from that man for all seasons (Gary Mack), Adelaide T&E Systems constructed a JFK crash test dummy, including head and torso, with a connecting neck. By their report, this yielded an accurate anatomical replica of the biological tissues of the head.

Under Mack’s guidance, a stationary limousine mock-up was positioned on a shooting range in Sylmar, California, to match the conditions of Elm Street. Even a huge fan was employed to simulate a 25 mph breeze. This was intended to take into account a head wind of 15–20 mph, superimposed on a limousine speed of 7–8.5 mph. The dummy was inserted to mimic JFK’s position and orientation.

For the traditional grassy knoll shot (while in Dealey Plaza), Yardley had noted that it was a possible shot, i.e., there was just enough time to track the limousine. At the Sylmar range, Yardley fired two shots, the first with a soft point round (a Winchester). This bullet exploded the entire skull. On the other hand, a Mannlicher-Carcano bullet (full metal jacket) created a large exit hole on the left side of the skull, leaving the rest of the skull largely intact. The program notes that Jackie would have been struck by such a bullet.

They conclude, therefore, that no grassy knoll shot was fired. (That it might merely have missed was not entertained at this point, though Mack finally mentions that option near the end of the program.)

For the posterior head shot, Mack marked the target site on the skull. Oddly enough, despite all of the incessant homage paid to the WC throughout the show, Mack did not choose the WC site. Instead he chose the site selected by the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), which is much higher. This higher site was quite adamantly denounced by the pathologists. (Of course, no one on the program commented on either of these paradoxes.) The simulated posterior shot blows off the top right of the skull and widely scatters debris. Some even falls on the front of the windshield and a large chunk falls on the trunk. Simulated brain seems to scatter widely around the limousine interior, though I actually saw little on the inside of the right rear door or on the back of the right front seat—the two sites that the show emphasizes as prominent blood scatter sites in real limousine. (Of course, no one notices that the “head snap” is absent at the shooting range—on what was supposedly the best model used to date.)

Two JFK witnesses (who had observed the actual limousine) viewed this test evidence (in photographs) and agreed that the spatter pattern matched what they had seen on 22 November 1963. (It would have been truly admirable if they had first been shown a wrong blood spatter pattern, just to see how flexible they were; curiously, the experiment shows debris going in nearly all directions; it is therefore not at all clear just how a wrong pattern would look.) Photos of the limousine in the garage in Washington, DC, just after midnight, are then

shown. Blood stains are chiefly seen on the seat; the narrator admits that blood spatter evidence is hard to see in these images. (Of course, that means that the two eyewitnesses now become the *sine qua non* in the key argument of the entire program. If their recollections are mistaken, the total show collapses.)

Two forensic experts are then invited to view the simulated blood spatter evidence in the mock-up. During the time interval that they agree that the spatter pattern indicates a shot from the rear, the graphics extend a trajectory to an image of the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository—even though the experts say nothing about this.

The experts then identify a hole in the dashboard, in front of the driver's seat. (That bullet would have passed through the body of the driver, but no one comments on this. Likewise, no one asks about the appearance of the bullet after the shooting.) The forensic experts then suggest that the bullet's path could, in principle, be traced backward in a straight line through this dashboard hole and the entry in JFK's head. (I would note that the trajectory would have been different for the actual WC entry site, i.e., the one that Mack did not choose. Of course, that was all left unsaid.) And no one questions whether the bullet might have been diverted from a straight line by its impact with the skull.

Mack then asks if they could reach this same conclusion without the hole in the dashboard. The experts merely reply that the forward scattering of debris is consistent with a shot from the rear. Neither of them ever mentions the sixth floor window, or Oswald for that matter, despite the overlying graphics.

The narrator concludes that the WC was right all along—it was Oswald from the sixth floor window. In fact this implication recurs with clocklike regularity throughout the program—amazingly, even before the experiment is shown. Gary Mack's final comment, though, was a surprising hedge: "The shot that killed President Kennedy did come from behind and *apparently* [emphasis added] from the sixth floor window." Mack also adds a totally gratuitous comment that does not follow from this specific experiment: "I haven't seen anything that counters the official story—that Kennedy was shot from behind from above."

A brief summary of what they did not do

Their chief oversight was not to think. Such incompetence must be laid at the feet of the producer/director, Robert Erickson, and perhaps Gary Mack, since he appears to have served as expert consultant. After all, Mack seems to direct the project while on film, and he feels free to offer unwarranted comments, which were not excised.

Though the casual viewer might be tempted to think otherwise after viewing this program, none of these statements were proven in this program:

1. A shot came from the sixth floor window.
2. Oswald fired this shot.

3. There was only one head shot.
4. There was no shot from the grassy knoll (i.e., a missed shot).
5. No other shots missed.
6. The windshield remained intact (i.e., no piercing shot).
7. The Zapruder film is reliable.
8. The limousine did not halt at the fatal moment.
9. A shot from the north overpass (the storm drain site) was excluded.
10. Only one shot hit JFK in the body (below the head).

As we have noted above, despite the apparent care to achieve an accurate simulation, the targeted site on the posterior head (chosen by Mack) was not the WC's site. If the WC site is ignored, how then can anything be concluded about the WC? The narrators served their own purposes well to avoid that entire quagmire.

The radical disagreement (between the WC and the HSCA) about the entry site of the posterior head shot—as well as the pathologists' vehement disagreement with the HSCA (whose entry site Mack chose)—is totally ignored in the program. Furthermore, no one cites any of the numerous Parkland physicians who actually viewed JFK's head; none of these specialists reported the entry site that Mack chose. (Their often-handwritten reports are still easily accessible in the Warren Report). In fact, and this is truly beyond belief, no one who saw JFK's actual head (not merely photos of it) ever reported seeing the site that Mack chose. Even the pathologists agreed with that conclusion. Finally, there is Latimer's shooting experiment with an authentic human skull, which yielded quite a different result from this program—but he targeted the WC site (see Gary Aguilar's discussion and figure in *Murder in Dealey Plaza*, p. 185).

The program cites Hargis, a motorcycle man, as struck by debris. What is not noted, however, is that he was struck so hard that he thought it was a bullet. Moreover, the follow-up car (the Secret Service car) also collected a great deal of debris; that is also ignored. Both of these facts are, of course, arguments for a second head shot—but from the front.

The matter of the second head shot is really the chief issue in this entire discussion. That issue has been extensively discussed elsewhere (see my prior essays in Fetzer's books) but, of course, was never addressed in this program. The reader should sift through the astonishing compendium of evidence that supports such a second shot, even including eyewitnesses, maps, tables, and documents in the WC itself. *Newsweek* (22 November 1993, pp. 74–75) even published a photograph of Dealey Plaza (from WC data) that showed quite a different site on Elm Street for the fatal head shot. In my view, that location is likely where the second head shot hit JFK—much closer to the storm drain.

The best location for the origin of this second head shot is the storm drain on the north side of the overpass. It was possible for a shooter to stand well inside this drain, even to park a vehicle over the drain, and for the gunman to fire between the slats in the wooden fence. Because of the way the fence was (and still is) angled at this point, it would have been difficult for anyone actually on the grassy knoll, or on the overpass, to see any activity in the storm drain, which is quite contrary to Mack's statement. In fact, that was my biggest surprise when I first visited this site: I felt quite alone, totally invisible to persons on the knoll or on the overpass. It was even possible then to crawl for a long distance through the drain and emerge far away in a river bed. Quite extraordinarily, photographs taken immediately after the assassination show a large crowd at precisely this site, including Robert MacNeil. My own observations of the skull X-rays had suggested to me a shot from about this direction—and that was before I discovered this photograph with MacNeil.

The final irony of this Discovery program is the reliance placed on eyewitnesses—there are just two, and it is, after all, 45 years later. Of course, the program had no choice: because the Secret Service bucket brigade had done its job so well at Parkland Hospital, the program could present no objective evidence of blood spatter from the actual crime scene. On the other hand, WC critics (even including some who are not conspiracy theorists) often rely on the statements of eyewitnesses made immediately after the event—especially when virtually all agree. The limousine stop at about frame 313 is the best example of this. However, lone gunman theorists repeatedly remind us that eyewitnesses cannot be trusted and that their comments should simply be ignored. Now that the shoe has shifted, will anyone notice?